

Neighbours' views of official sites for travelling people

The creation of permanent sites for travelling people is usually contentious and often results in strong local opposition. Tom Duncan at the Planning Exchange, Glasgow went back to objectors and neighbours of three sites in central Scotland to find out their views on the impact of the sites after they had been up and running for a year or more. He found that:

- f** In the three sites studied, all of which appeared to be well run, the problems experienced by site neighbours were far less than they had anticipated.
- f** Many neighbours' fears had been based on previous experiences of illegal or unauthorised encampments; they tended to have had greater experience of these than of official sites.
- f** Most domestic householders had no specific complaints and many acknowledged that their previous opposition had proved groundless.
- f** Primary schools in the areas concerned had been able to cope with the arrival of traveller children.
- f** Police authorities acknowledged the contribution of the sites to meeting travellers' needs and reported no noticeable increase in crime in the vicinity of sites.
- f** A small number of farms and businesses reported continuing problems which they attributed to the close proximity of sites. However, the study suggests that even these remaining problems might have been significantly reduced had spending discussed at the time of site creation been proceeded with.
- f** The study concluded that well-run official sites have nothing like the disadvantages for neighbours which many anticipate before their creation. Economies which will have the effect of reducing the acceptability of a site in its neighbourhood should therefore be looked at very closely indeed by site providers.

Background

Proposals to create official sites for travelling people often attract extreme opposition from neighbours. This is the first study which has returned systematically to those people with houses, businesses or farms in the vicinity of local authority-run travellers' sites, who made sustained objections at the time of development, to ask about their experiences once the site has been up and running for some time.

Research took place on three sites in central Scotland. Two of these were the only sites in recent years which had come through the public local inquiry process to the development stage. One had been open for over four years, the other for over one year. The third site had been developed without a public inquiry but had experienced substantial opposition. It had been open for over four years at the time of this survey.

Much of the opposition stemmed from neighbours' experiences of illegal encampments rather than of official sites. Such illegal camps had occurred at times near all three sites. These were invariably traumatic experiences and respondents were quick to contrast their experience of official sites with these earlier events.

General impact on neighbours

In all three sites the adverse impact which objectors and many other neighbours had anticipated had been far less than expected. In fact in the cases of domestic householders, utilities and most businesses, there had been very little impact at all. Fears which had been expressed about traffic safety and congestion, theft and swamping of local facilities had not materialised.

Domestic householders

The survey indicated that domestic householders had rarely been disadvantaged by having a site nearby and most had changed their views since the sites had come into operation. Many pointed out that

continued close supervision of the site would be needed to ensure this state of affairs continued.

It was nonetheless clear that the views of domestic householders had changed very markedly from the time the sites were established, probably more than any other group of neighbours. Only a few, especially close to the site, and not all of these, had concerns which remained close to the surface.

Evidence on property values was inconclusive. While some contended that house values had been affected, this was difficult to establish with any certainty. In other cases there was evidence of housebuilding taking place within 50m of one site boundary, suggesting the impact of sites on the local housing market had been minimal.

Schools

All five schools affected by the sites in the study felt able to cope with the influx of traveller children, partly because fewer of the resident children than expected had attended local primary schools. Education authorities had generally allocated additional resources, sometimes in the form of a specialist part-time teacher who could give individual attention to children whose education had generally been interrupted. In all cases teachers indicated that traveller children integrated well socially.

Crime

Police officers recognised the contribution which the official sites had made to the accommodation of traveller families in the districts concerned and reported no increase in criminal activity attributable to the presence of the sites.

Problem areas

This generally positive picture was modified only in the cases of a small number of farms and business premises. Even here problems experienced were generally less than had been anticipated, except in one instance where they were felt to be as bad as had been expected.

The problems reported included trespass on to nearby farmland and resulting damage to crops, fences and gates and to livestock by dogs. Related problems included the difficulty of leaving the property unattended and extra time spent checking property and stock.

Other problems reported related to petty theft, periodic harassment and the parking of vehicles on private land. While such problems did not necessarily occur every week, the very proximity of affected premises to the sites implied to those concerned that there was always a possibility they might occur and, as a result, an ongoing need for vigilance and for apprehension.

Proximity of itself did not seem to determine whether problems would be experienced. Domestic householders close to the sites did not report problems. But proximity of business premises which had specific relevance to travellers' interests did result in some problems arising.

None of the case study sites had been provided with all the facilities which had been suggested at earlier stages in their development. For instance, each was intended to have play facilities for children but in the event none had what was earlier planned. It appeared that the government cost guidelines had been reached or exceeded in providing the essential site facilities, infrastructure and layout.

In the same vein, a fence which might have provided security for a business near one of the sites was omitted from the final spending plan. A lorry parking area was deleted from the same plan.

Although not omitted on financial grounds, it was noted during the study that at one site out of the three, a high perimeter fence had not been provided and therefore access to nearby farmland was easier. Greater problems on that land were reported, confirming the findings of other research linking disruption to farming operations on the urban fringe with ease of access on to land.

Conclusions

The three official sites in this study had far less impact on their neighbourhoods than these communities had feared. Their impact bore no relation to the experience of illegal encampments with which neighbours had earlier been much more familiar.

While it is well-documented that disturbance to farming operations commonly occurs on the urban fringe, more might have been done in certain of the case study sites to minimise the likelihood of problems arising with immediate neighbours in the farming or business communities. It would, however, have called for additional capital spending and some spending outside the immediate site boundary. Against a backdrop of costs per pitch which already exceeded the prevailing government guidelines, this may have appeared an unlikely priority.

It is an aspect, however, which should merit more serious consideration if one of the concerns in official site provision is to minimise disadvantage to close neighbours and to maximise the acceptability of a site to its surrounding community.

About the study

Research was undertaken at three sites in central Scotland between January and June 1996. Contact was made with 39 neighbour respondents. (11 other possible contacts had moved away or refused to take part.)

'Neighbours' were defined broadly to include householders, businesses, farms, and utilities. The study also included local schools and police officers, as well as local authority officials, some elected members and the three site managers. The initial list of neighbours included key objectors who had appeared at the public inquiries or had otherwise led opposition to the creation of the sites. These contacts were supplemented by those in the field who were evidently found to be close to the sites.

Further information

The full report, **Neighbours' Views of Official Sites for Travelling People**, is published by the Planning Exchange and is available from the Publications Department, The Planning Exchange, Tontine House, 8 Gordon Street, Glasgow G1 3PL. Tel: 0141 248 8541. Fax: 0141 248 8277. Price £9.95 includes postage. Please forward cheques with orders.



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